

## Section IV. Conclusion

---

### Summary

In considering the historic significance of prefabricated housing, its role on the American cultural landscape must be understood. Prefab housing contributes to our understanding of the transformation from traditional building methods of the nineteenth century to industrialized, mass-produced construction techniques of the twentieth century. Much of the industry's research and development concentrated on how to find low-cost and efficient ways to build housing on a large scale, allowing many families to buy their first dream house-- a place to call their own. Though not all prefab house production methods or types were successful or enduring, they did leave a legacy of affordable, modern housing on our cultural landscape.

This report attempted to offer a preliminary understanding of the development and history of the American prefabricated housing industry of the early- to mid-twentieth century. By no means does this represent the final word on prefabricated housing. Research and analysis of this topic for preservation planning and cultural resource management issues is just beginning. As a profession, there is much more information that will need to be gathered and analyzed in terms of identification of prefabs in order to make strong and meaningful eligibility and integrity standards.

The survey work in Marshall and McCracken counties in the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape region along with the archival research for this report has helped to gain a provisional understanding of the property types associated with the prefab industry. Though this study is heavily weighted toward identification of these resources, we have begun a dialogue to assess eligibility and integrity for the National Register of Historic Places. The data collected for this report has allowed for some initial assessments for evaluation and integrity considerations. It is hoped that the result of this report will open a discussion about the significance and preservation of prefabricated housing.

## Suggestions for Further Research

The work on prefabricated housing is certainly not finished and in fact has really has just begun. Like many resources of the recent past, the amount of scholarly research about the topic of prefabricated housing is very low. Research about precut property types has received the most attention mainly because these resources date from an earlier period. As you may know, there has been an inherent bias in the preservation field toward the oldest resources, though the National Register asks us to examine all resources over 50 years in age.

Just as vexing, some precut manufacturers have had more attention than others, most notably Sears. It will be important to develop more information about the other companies involved in selling mail-order houses like the Aladdin Company, Gordon-Van Tine, and Lewis/Liberty. Most of these manufacturers continued to produce prefabricated housing years after Sears ceased operations in this industry. It is important to distinguish the particular manufacturer associated with a resource and note that there were many other precut manufacturers other than the Sears Company.

Even less understood are the property types associated with panelized, sectional, or preassembled production methods. Among the more nationally known companies that produced these types of prefabs like Gunnison Homes and National Homes, there are no published field guides that identify all of the different models offered. Lesser-known regional companies like Steelcraft, Peaseway, and General Plywood have had even less recognition. More research about these companies and the impact on the landscape needs to be undertaken.

In addition to the traditional way of looking at prefab housing, this project has opened a new avenue for inquiry. In Paducah, African American home owners were turning to prefab houses as an alternative to traditional housing options. Whether this phenomenon was due to the fact that skilled building craftspersons were available to assist with the customization of the prefabs or with the reality of discriminatory practices within the lending industries, it is possible that these conditions existed in other communities. A fascinating study could be undertaken that looks at African American housing within the lens of prefabricated housing to help us better understand both the factors leading to adoption of prefabs by the Black community and to the dynamics between the local housing industries, prefab manufacturers, and African American consumers. Were prefab companies marketing toward African American consumers? Or were Black consumers appropriating this suburban dream to their



own ends? Clearly, at least in the Paducah case, prefab houses were used as a way to assert independence from traditional channels that may have been oppressive. Much more research needs to be accomplished to demonstrate these hypotheses.

Obviously, research on this topic in the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region needs to continue. This report was only able to “scratch the surface” of the prefab resources extant in this region. It is presumed that prefabricated housing probably exists in some form in every county in Kentucky. Though prefabricated housing is not the sole type of domestic architecture of the twentieth century, it did have an important place within architectural history. Finding ways to make identification and evaluation of these prefab resources was a goal of this report. It is hoped that future research will add to this initial body of knowledge about prefabricated housing.